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BEST IN CLASS
Antwerp
Big ideas

Hidden inside an imposing townhouse, Graanmarkt 13 is a step ahead of routine retail.

By *Debbie Pappyn*

Belgium's second city is known for many things, not least its vibrant port, diamonds and fashion designers. It's also home to charming independent shops, crowned by Graanmarkt 13. The retailer is hidden on a leafy square in the historic heart of Antwerp. On sunny days, chairs and tables from its restaurant spill onto the cobbled streets, lending a dose of Mediterranean flair to the Old Town.

Though it opened almost a decade ago, Graanmarkt 13 remains a paragon of what retail can look like. At a time

when bricks-and-mortar shops are struggling worldwide, it's always a step ahead. It has created a brand around products that are made to last, avoiding buying into seasonal trends. From shirts to handmade ceramics, everything on offer within the high-ceilinged rooms of the neoclassical townhouse is carefully selected to match that philosophy.

The building, revamped by Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen, is furnished and stocked like a home. Each floor adds something to the experience, whether it's Seppe Nobels' plant-focused restaurant on the lower ground floor, the shop and event space or the upstairs rental apartment and rooftop herb garden – with beehives – that supply the kitchen with produce and honey.

Ilse Cornelissens and Tim Van Geloven, the Belgian-Dutch couple who founded Graanmarkt 13 in 2010, used to live above the shop but now let out the apartment. It offers additional revenue and another reason for people to visit. "We don't sell trends but objects for life," says Cornelissens, when asked

In brief:

Who: Belgian-Dutch couple Ilse Cornelissens and Tim Van Geloven opened Graanmarkt 13 in 2010, in a townhouse renovated by Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen.

What: Graanmarkt 13 isn't your usual shopping experience: the carefully selected fashion and homeware collections on display don't adhere to trends and the restaurant offers Belgian dishes. And for those that don't want to leave, there's a cosy holiday apartment on the upper floors.

Where: The concept store is located on Graanmarkt Square next to the Bourla theatre and the Schuttershof shopping street.

Report card: How the founders of Graanmarkt 13 describe the shop – a place to stock up on classic and understated things to wear and use in the house – is not a marketing ploy. The selection is well curated and presented in a relaxed setting that's complemented by the cooking of chef Seppe Nobels.

More recommendations:

SHOP: Copyright, Sint-Andries: Head to this bookshop – founded by Antwerp-born art historian Hilde Peleman – for monographs, magazines and books on art, design, architecture and typography. copyrightbookshop.be

VISIT: Mas, Eilandje: Antwerp's iconic Museum aan de Stroom (Mas) teeters on the edge of the harbour. Its contents tell the story of the city's glory years as a port. mas.be

DINE: Le John, Theaterbuurt: This staple of the Antwerp creative set is elevated by its sober decor. The menu changes regularly and drinks are served in the bar upstairs. lejohn.be

about how she stocks the fashion-filled rails and brimming display tables. "That is why we stopped the twice-a-year sales concept that most shops adhere to. We focus on ageless and durable labels and designers." The pair are always looking for new ways to engage with customers but don't believe in slashing prices. Instead they host a secondhand market twice a year; customers can hand in and sell worn clothing and spend their earnings on new products in the shop.

"Consumerism has become too fast and too shallow thanks to social media," says Cornelissens. "We try to be different by stocking brands based close to home, such as Belgian fashion designer Sofie D'Hoore, Monique van Heist – a Dutch designer – and the Parisian label Cristaseya."

Building a relationship with brands is important for the team at Graanmarkt 13 and so is nurturing designers, such as Spanish-born Eva Velazquez. The Brussels-based auteur uses vintage and upcycled materials to create her collections. Her hard-to-come-by

pieces are given a platform at Graanmarkt 13. "We noticed that consumers were buying less and more consciously," says Cornelissens. "The retail industry doesn't want to pick up on this so we do."

Customers such as Stijn Rolies, a designer and architect from Antwerp, appreciate the couple's initiative. "It feels like walking around a home filled with tactile materials, refined products and accessories," he says. The downstairs restaurant has also become a meeting place for locals, including Gilles de Coster, a Belgian TV presenter who considers the shop and the food of chef Nobels – Belgian-sourced delicacies such as dune-grown asparagus with sheep's cheese – a reflection of the current mood. "The food is simple, seasonal and beautifully presented," he says. It seems that investing in longevity is the key to weathering the storm in the world of retail. — (M)

Graanmarkt 13, 2000
+32 (0)3 337 7991
graanmarkt13.com




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PHOTOGRAPHERS: *Jussi Puikkinen, Daaid De Vleeschauter*

